

The Chicken Is Just Dead First

by

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A thesis exhibition

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfillment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Studio Art

University of Waterloo Art Gallery, April 15th- May 1st

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2021

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Authors Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

As Black women we have the right and responsibility to define ourselves and to seek our allies in common cause: with Black men against racism, and with each other and white women against sexism. But most of all, as Black women we have the right and responsibility to recognize each other without fear and to love where we choose. Both lesbian and heterosexual Black women today share a history of bonding and strength to which our sexual identities and our other differences must not blind us.¹ -Audre Lorde

My thesis exhibition encapsulates my lived experience as a Black woman from Barbados who moved to Guelph, Ontario at eighteen. My studio and artistic research is focused on the ways that food, ritual, hair, and colonialism intersect with the Black female body. By employing the medium of performance art and research into the history of colonization, I use my body to challenge preconceived characterizations (loud, angry, aggressive) often used to define Black women. This research culminated in my MFA thesis that takes the form of performance for the camera and installation. The outcomes of my performances for the camera are as important as my deep-rooted memories they uncover, often prompting further exploration into images I create and their meanings such as for example the seemingly mundane action of washing rice. Keeping traditions (food, ritual, hair) alive through acts of image making is important to me because the videos I create echo the oral nature of the way things have been passed down to me.

The exhibition consists of three large-scale projections with my solo performances for the camera on each, featuring my body against bright, colourful backdrops. Two wall-mounted monitors display video artwork with my family, filmed in domestic environments such as my mother's kitchen, living room, and granny's kitchen. Lastly, several small CRT (Cathode Ray Tube) televisions are placed on the floor of the gallery displaying scenes from the East Coast of Barbados.

¹ Audre Lorde, "*Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*." (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2015), 109.

Acknowledgements

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my committee, Bojana Videkanic and Jessica Thompson, for their endless support throughout the Masters of Fine Arts program at the University of Waterloo. Their persistence, tenacity, understanding, kindness and humour have not gone unappreciated. Also, I cannot express my appreciation enough to everyone at UWAG who made the show a reality.

I thank my fellow cohort for their continued support, group Zoom writing sessions and socially distanced walks in Waterloo Park together. We all braved the most unprecedented time, and completed graduate school during a pandemic.

I am so grateful for Ed Video Media Centre and the artists I'm thankful to call friends: Madeleine Lycheek, Carolina Benetiz, Jo Sparkes and Hannah Moffitt. Thank you for always being available to help me film my artwork. Additionally, I appreciate the time Tabitha Davis and Georgia Daniels spent with me in Barbados driving around to capture footage.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family who this would certainly not have been possible without. My parents, Elen Haynes, Desmond Rowe, and Desmond Haynes --thank you for your continued support. Collectively, they have taught me that I can accomplish any and everything.

Land Acknowledgement

As a Black woman, I am grateful for the privilege to conduct research and cultural work which engages with the Kitchener-Waterloo Guelph region. I wish to acknowledge the land on which the University of Waterloo operates. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional territory of the Attawandaron (Neutral), Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. The University of Waterloo is situated on the Haldimand Tract, the land promised to the Six Nations that includes ten kilometers on each side of the Grand River.

Understanding that Black people have arrived to the region through a number of migrations, many in search of semblance of a better life, we must not be complacent to the over 151 years of oppression, assimilation, violence and genocide inflicted upon Indigenous people. For Black people to achieve liberation, we must choose to intrinsically link our causes with the struggle for sovereignty among our Indigenous family.

Black Lives Matter.

One night I was working late in the studio and there was
an immense amount of snowfall outside.

Too scared to drive back to Guelph, I called my partner, Nicholas,
who didn't hesitate to hop in his car and come pick me up.

To my husband who this would not have been possible without, thank you.

Table of Contents

Authors Declaration.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
List of Figures.....	viii
To Bridgetown with Seats and Moving.....	1
The Chicken Is Just Dead First.....	4
Good morning Barbados good morning.....	7
Can I Touch Your Hair?.....	15
#realhotgirlshit.....	20
There's a Brown girl in the ring.....	24
Closer to Home.....	32
Bibliography.....	33
Glossary.....	36

List of Figures

Figure.0 Racquel Rowe, *The Chicken Is Just Dead First*, 2021, Photo by Scott Lee

Figure.1 Racquel Rowe, *Making Sweet Bread with Gran*, 2020, video still

Figure.2 Racquel Rowe, *Salt Fish & Rice*, 2020, video still

Figure.3 Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, photograph

Figure.4 Racquel Rowe, *Untitled Scenic I*, 2020, video still

Figure.5 Racquel Rowe, *Untitled Scenic II*, 2020, video still

Figure.6 Racquel Rowe, *Mummy Please do My Hair*, 2020, video still

Figure.7 Racquel Rowe, *Taking Down*, 2020, video still

Figure.8 Instagram meme, @ezdetanglebrush 2021, screenshot

Figure.9 Camille Turner, *Red White and Beautiful Tour* 2002-present. Photograph

Figure 10 Renee Cox, *Liberation of Aunt Jemima & Uncle B* (1998) CibaChrome Print

Figure.11 Racquel Rowe, *Untitled Cotton*, 2020, video still

Figure.12 Racquel Rowe, *Washing Rice I*, 2019, video still

Figure.13 Racquel Rowe, *Washing Rice II*, 2019, video still

Figure.14 Racquel Rowe, *Washing Rice I (the remake)*, 2021, video still

Figure.15 Racquel Rowe, *Washing Rice II (the remake)*, 2021, video still

To Bridgetown with Seats and Moving

My thesis exhibition encapsulates my lived experience as a Black woman from Barbados who moved to a small city in Southern Ontario. The tension between the different artworks in the show mimics the anxieties I confront every day as I grapple with my evolving identity, and work to keep certain aspects of my culture and heritage alive. My artwork is continuously influenced by many aspects of history, my childhood, and upbringing in Barbados.

I grew up in Barbados and came to Canada as an international student at the age of eighteen. I discovered performance art at the University of Guelph, and this discovery changed and shaped both my understanding of contemporary art and what my practice could be. My time at the University of Waterloo allowed me to delve deeper into my artistic practice, and to further develop different conceptual and theoretical approaches to the themes I uncover. My practice is focused on how the complex history of the Caribbean, including social and cultural practices around food, various conceptions of the Black female body, ideas around Black hair, cultural rituals, and the history of colonialism, intersect with the lived experience of Black women.

The global effects and legacies of British colonialism that affect how Black women are perceived largely remain the same. While recognizing that Black women across the Commonwealth have experienced very different forms of racism, my performances examine and call forth the many similarities that come from our shared legacy of colonialism. Both Canada and Barbados (as well as many Caribbean islands) were colonized by the British, resulting in similarities in social and economic structures, inequality, racism, colourism and misogyny. Moving away from Barbados enabled me to see how these systems played out on a larger scale (i.g. in a larger country), and perhaps

also globally. I am interested in the complexities that have shaped the Caribbean region as a whole. I explore these complexities within my practice through both live performance and performance for the camera that centres on my personal identity as a Black female subject.

Description of the Exhibition

When one enters the gallery, the room is illuminated by large scale video projections and the air is filled with sounds of 'home'. The visitor is immediately confronted with a floating nine-foot screen showing me, sitting in an office chair in front of a bright yellow backdrop. Wearing sage green tights and white tank top, I hold scissors in my hands as I undo my braids. The sound of my breathing is punctuated by the sharp snip-snap of the scissors cutting the braids (Figure 7). In the video that follows I am shown sitting on the ground in front of a lavender backdrop with a pile of rice and two clear glass bowls, one empty and one filled with water. One can hear the rice sloshing in the bowl of water as I wash it (Figure 13). On the left wall of the gallery are two seven-foot projections placed side by side. Each projection features my body against the same lavender backdrop. In the first projection I am lying naked on my stomach, my face is slightly visible as rice is poured onto my head. In the second projection, the same performance is repeated. The shimmering sound of rice falling on floor comes in and out, as I am slowly engulfed (Figure 12 and 14). Immediately following the first video a second video starts showing a two mirrored projections of cotton falling on top of my head. In these videos the backdrop is a light green and I lay flat on my back in black underwear as cotton balls fall from above, burying my head (Figure 11). On the wall right of the mirrored projection, two large monitors are mounted showing three scenes of domestic life in Barbados (Figure 1 and 2). Headphones hang on the wall, connected to the televisions so one can listen in on the

conversations present in each artwork. There are four small CRT monitors displaying scenic footage of the East Coast of Barbados on the ground in the right corner of the gallery (Figure 4 and 5).



Figure.0 Racquel Rowe, *The Chicken Is Just Dead First*, 2021, Photo by Scott Lee

The Chicken Is Just Dead First

The ‘chicken is just dead first’ is a euphemism for the unique differences between island life and North America. The phrase was borrowed from Zalika Reid-Benta’s collection of short stories entitled *Frying Plantain*. The stories focus on the experiences of a first generation Canadian with Jamaican roots growing up in Toronto and the complexities that come with this. The protagonist expresses this sentiment when she visits Jamaica in her early childhood and sees a chicken being killed for the first time. Shocked and frightened she says:

“Only two days before I’d squealed when Rodney, who was ten like me, had wrung a chicken’s neck without warning; the jerk of his hands and the quick snap of the bone had made me fall back against the coops behind me. He turned to me after I’d silenced myself and his mouth and nose were twisted up as if he was deciding whether he was irritated with me or contemptuous or just amused. ‘Ah wah? He asked. ‘Yuh nuh cook soup in Canada?’ ‘sure we do,’ I said, my voice a mumble. ‘the chicken is just dead first’. He didn’t respond, and he didn’t say anything about it in front of our other cousins, but soon after, they all treated me with a newfound delicacy.”²

This image gives insight into the unique differences growing up in North America versus the Caribbean, but also helps to contextualize my own early experiences with food and animals. As she grows up, the protagonist realizes that she is ‘othered’ in different ways both in Canada and Jamaica; she thus belongs in neither place. Leaving my predominantly Black country of origin had a profound influence on me – I was not ‘othered’ until I moved to Canada.

It is strange to suddenly become a minority in one’s adult life, and the move had a great impact on my lived experience which in turn informed my artistic practice. I quickly learned that many people have preconceived (racist) notions of what living in a ‘tropical paradise’ is like: they range from assuming that no one has a ‘real’ or ‘normal’ job and people spend all day

² Zalika Reid-Benta, “Frying Plantain: Stories.” (Toronto: Astoria, 2020.) print, 4.

relaxing, or that we all live in huts on the beach. Both things are within the range of questions I was asked when I first came to Canada as an international student in 2015. This pushed me to create artworks with a distinctly Caribbean setting, using contexts that were deliberately not intended for a Canadian audience. While I knew that this work might cause confusion with my predominantly white audiences, I also knew that they would be legible to those who shared my lived experience. Perhaps it was and is my way of pushing against complete assimilation into the ‘Canadian culture’.

Like the protagonists in Zalika Reid-Benta’s stories, I found myself in the position of slowly beginning to blend aspects of two cultures (Barbados and Canada), first starting with food. During Christmas dinner at her grandmothers the protagonist muses:

“...she starts shaving off portions of the turkey, digging out some of the stuffing with a fork afterwards. Three slices on the dish and six forkfuls on the slices. She adds three large spoonfuls of rice and peas, and then two pieces of ham with baked pineapple. The four slices of plantain lets me know this plate is for me.”³

This blend of the traditional Canadian turkey mixed with distinctly Caribbean rice and peas, baked pineapple and fried plantain creates a story of memory, place, time, and culture. Subconsciously, the merger of Caribbean foods and select combinations of dishes, brings the warmth and comfort of being home, creating that sensation of familiarity with newly-learned Canadian traditions. In the 1960s, my father’s parents, my granny and grandad, moved to the United Kingdom as part of the Windrush generation⁴ in hope of finding economic prosperity and undertaking a new adventure. They took their traditions, especially cooking, with them. After bringing her recipes with her, my granny

³ Reid-Benta “Frying Plantain”, 90.

⁴ The Windrush generation refers to people arriving in the United Kingdom between 1948 and 1971 from Caribbean countries. It refers to the ship MV Empire Windrush, which in 1948 brought workers from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados etc. to the United Kingdom to help fill post-war labour shortages.

often reminisces about having to go to Sainsbury's, a popular British supermarket, to find the right kind of butter and the right kind of cheese so that the Macaroni pie would come out just right. Through food Caribbean people can make a home anywhere.

Part of my practice draws from this rich history of food in the Caribbean and in my own family history. In my performances, I utilize many of the same rituals and practices, such as the ways in which food is handled and processed, as well as the ways in which the recipes are passed down, adapted, and transformed over time. To this day, my mother will call my grandmother to ask for a recipe that contains no precise measurements, leaving my mother to adjust things as she goes. Texture, taste, and smell are the markers of whether or not a dish is turning out well, and there is always room for adjustment during the cooking process. My mother will often stay on the phone with my grandmother as she cooks, and oftentimes my grandmother will call back later to see how it went, or tell my mother of an ingredient she forgot.

Good morning Barbados good morning

When the pandemic broke out in Canada in March 2020, I decided to go back to Barbados to be with my family where I was able to spend the next four months working

in ways that I never had before. This period was the longest I had spent at home since moving to Canada. Being in Barbados allowed me to expand my video artworks into new environments, but it also presented new challenges—such as not having access to proper backdrops and professional equipment. I explored many of the same principles I was using in Canada, but in collaboration with my family. As a result, I performed durational artworks with my mother, and labour-intensive artworks with my granny.



Figure 1. Racquel Rowe, *Making Sweet Bread with Gran*, 2020, video still



Figure 2. Racquel Rowe, *Saltfish & Rice*, 2020, video still

Making Sweet Bread with Gran (2020) is a video artwork that records my granny teaching me how to make sweet bread.⁵ In the video still above (Figure 1), we are in my granny's kitchen. I am leaning forward onto the kitchen counter and attentively study my granny as she kneads the dough in a silver bowl. My hair has been cornrowed by my mother, and I am wearing a yellow and turquoise shirt. She has short grey hair and is wearing a white tank top. She is hunched over putting all of her weight into the labour-intensive task of kneading the dough. There is a bright red mop bucket and a blue broom and dustpan in the background of the frame. During the filming of this video I decided to leave all aspects of it as they were shot, such as for example the moment in which as my granny and I are working on the dough we were also talking about this artwork. This is a way of recording and preserving our family history and oral traditions. Due to the nature of these oral histories, it is vital that I chronicle them while my

⁵ Sweet bread is a richly textured coconut bread that contains maraschino cherries and raisins.

granny is still around so that they can be preserved for future generations and other iterations of the artwork.

Saltfish & Rice (2020) shows my mother in our kitchen preparing a meal. In the video, she is standing at the stove with her golden blonde hair, wearing a white shirt with red stripes. Laid out in front of her are various items including: two blue plates with chopped okras and onions, a white plate on which she separates saltfish by hand, a bag of rice, a tub of Bajan seasoning, the house phone and a notepad. The stove is filled with pans and a kettle. The background features the rest of the kitchen and, most notably, a pile of clean dishes. The artwork begins off camera with my mother calling my grandmother for the recipe for saltfish and rice. I listen in while they chat, as my grandmother trails off ingredients, telling my mother how to go about making the dish. She doesn't have quite precise measurements, instead she says "a pinch there, a pinch here, and stir it till it looks just right". I watch as my mother begins to make the recipe. Shortly, the phone rings with an ingredient my grandmother forgot, and later there is a second call to check in on the progress of the dish.

I examine the continuity between generations in this artwork. According to author Sarah Lawson Welsh, such conversations surrounding food are important to the way in which Caribbean identities and histories have been explored, as well as allowing for "considerable room for improvisation" which can lead to ingenuity.⁶ Whereas my artwork explores the personal and familial, Sarah Lawson Welsh's writing recontextualizes similar ideas in a multitude of different communities in Barbados on a larger scale. As part of her book *Food, Text and Culture in the Anglophone Caribbean*, Welsh developed a series of interviews that she calls the *KitchenTalk* series in which she utilised oral history as an important means of gathering first

⁶ Sarah Lawson Welsh "Food, Text and Culture in the Anglophone Caribbean." (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2019) 114.

accounts of social and cultural life. The recordings document her as she goes out into different social gatherings in Barbados where elderly people frequent to ask about food, cooking, and recipes. The project, “considers the role of oral traditions in the preparation, cooking and consumption of home-cooked food in a time of uncertainty and change, as traditional gender roles continue to shift, fast-food outlets proliferate and fewer households home cook or cook ‘from scratch’.”⁷ Sarah Lawson Welsh’s depiction of the oral tradition and food further peaked my interest into exploring food traditions in Barbados, as seen in *Making Sweetbread with Gran* and *Saltfish & Rice*.

⁷ Welsh “*Food, Text and Culture*”139



Figure 3. Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, photograph

Outside of the strictly Caribbean context, the kitchen is a place that has been examined and re-examined by Black female thinkers as a site of refuge, work, abuse and countless other nuances. For example, artist Carrie Mae Weems explores the relationships between families, cultural identity, political systems, and power through a series of photographs. In an interview with bell hooks, Weems describes her *Kitchen Table Series* and its impact on the Black community:

bell hooks: Carrie Mae, whenever I see your work I am deeply moved. More than any contemporary photographer creating representations of blackness, your work evokes the exilic nature of Black people. Everyone forgets that when we talk

about Black people living in the diaspora, we're talking about a people who live in exile, and that in some ways, like all other exiles, we imagine home, we imagine journeys of return...

Carrie Mae Weems: In most every Black person's life today, home is where you find it, just where you find it. To me this suggests open possibility that home can be for me Portland, Oregon, to the same extent that it can be New York or Ghana or Maui or Senegal. It doesn't matter.

bell hooks: The specific postmodern deconstructive positionality that interrogates notions of fixed origins, of roots, is not JUST in this new work that lays claim to Africa as a possible site of home, but in all your work.

Carrie Mae Weems: Home for me is both mysterious and mythic-the known and the unknown. My search begins with the Sea Islands piece. That initial focus on family folklore was the beginning of my searching out a home place, trying to figure out for myself, that moment in the early 1980s, where I come from, how is that place constructed, what went on there, what was that sort of historical movement about. In any case, the movement of my family, leaving Mississippi, traveling & from the South to the North, that kind of migration. I wanted to know how I fit into that as a woman who was already starting to move around, starting to travel, and digging, digging.⁸

Like Welsh and Weems, my artworks explore domesticity, migration, labour and the ways in which Black women carve out space for themselves where space is not afforded to them. In the Caribbean and North America Black women and food have a complicated relationship, both regions have become primary producers of crops and livestock through slave labour, and Black women have historically laboured as housekeepers, cooks and primary care givers. The intersections of this knowledge and the historical implications of the Black female body continuously inform my artwork.

⁸ bell hooks, *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics*. (New York: New Press, 1998.) 74-76

Postcard from Home



Figure 4. Racquel Rowe, *Untitled Scenic I*, 2020, video still



Figure 5. Racquel Rowe, *Untitled Scenic II*, 2020, video still

Untitled Scenic I and II (2020) showcase the lush scenery of the island, like a ‘Welcome to Barbados’ postcard. The video in Figure 4 depicts the East Coast of Barbados, the side of the island that touches the Atlantic Ocean. The image foreground shows a dirt road, with rows of coconut trees and giant green leaves on both sides. To the left is a green field, and to the right are limestone boulders. The sky is bright blue, with the ocean receding far into the background. The video in Figure 5 depicts similar imagery, shot on the East Coast as well, this time down on a beach. The image captures a typical coastal scene, the coconut trees stand erect against the wind, large moss green and grey limestone boulders are motionless, as waves are barrelling in the background. While most of the artwork in the exhibition is displayed in landscape format (in 16:9 widescreen aspect ratio), these artworks are shown on CRTs (in 3:4 ratio format). This older format is used deliberately as it speaks to the nostalgia for my childhood and my early memories of technology. Growing up, contemporary art in Barbados for me consisted of painting and drawing, the idea of video artwork as art was wildly outside my scope of knowledge. Part of why this occurred is due to the technological divide between larger more ‘developed’ countries and smaller island nations.

Can I Touch Your Hair?⁹



Figure 6. Racquel Rowe, *Mummy Please do My Hair*, 2020, video still

My mum has always done my hair, and ever since I can remember this ritual has been enacted between the two of us. *Mummy Please do My Hair* (2020) consists of a compilation of shots taken in my living room, always from the same vantage point. My mother sits on the couch, she combs and braids my hair into cornrows, as we watch television together. Figure 6 shows me seated on the ground between my mother's legs looking off to the side, mouth open, wearing a lilac tank top and striped shorts. My mother is wearing her blue work shirt and denim pants, she is looking towards the television with my hair in hand. Next to her on the couch are leave-in conditioner and a brush. When I think about Black hair and its complexities, I think of how important it is to me to have a parent who places an emphasis on caring for my hair.

Exploring Black hair is a recurring theme in my artwork that always brings my mother into

⁹ This is a racist request because it demands access to my body and other Black bodies that historically were robbed of any agency.

mental focus. I think of her performing different acts of care before and after work during a period when she was a single mother. Like many other Caribbean women, my mother is the backbone of our family, and watching the videos of her braiding my hair in her work clothes reminds me of the continual obligation placed on Black women to be the breadwinners and keep their families afloat. This obligation is historically rooted in colonialism and slavery. After slavery was abolished in the United States and Caribbean, many Black men could not find jobs, this left much of the burden of providing for the families on Black women who were able to work as maids, housekeepers, cooks, nannies and wet nurses. Domestic service jobs, however, were not defined as ‘real work’ and thus little to no value was placed on them. White men saw these jobs as “merely an extension of the ‘natural’ female role.”¹⁰



Figure 7. Racquel Rowe, *Taking Down*, 2020, video still

¹⁰ bell hooks, “Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism.” (London: Routledge, 2015) 91

Taking Down (2020) (Figure 7) depicts me sitting in an office chair, in front of a bright yellow backdrop, wearing sage green tights and a white tank top, scissors in my lap, feverishly taking out a braid. Taking down your hair is an act that many Black women are familiar with, the process of sitting down to take your braids out, cutting them first perhaps when they are long, the talent of being able to find where your hair ends and proceeding accordingly. This process can be long and arduous but is ultimately satisfying. *Taking Down* is a performance that explores the public versus private life of Black hair. It documents a laborious act that serves as an extension of the Black body and speaks to the power in Black and intimacy of taking your hair out in front of people. Within Black communities, unisex salons are not typical—the salon is often a private space for women only, where one enters with a scarf over the hair and emerges many hours later, ‘beautified’. The meme shown in Figure 8 illustrates what happens when that space is invaded—Black women feel vulnerable and exposed, no longer in safe space to ‘let their hair down’. My performance for the camera ends midway through taking down the braids, as my hair is left in a vulnerable state in between the hair that was and my natural hair that needs some care after months of being safely tucked away.

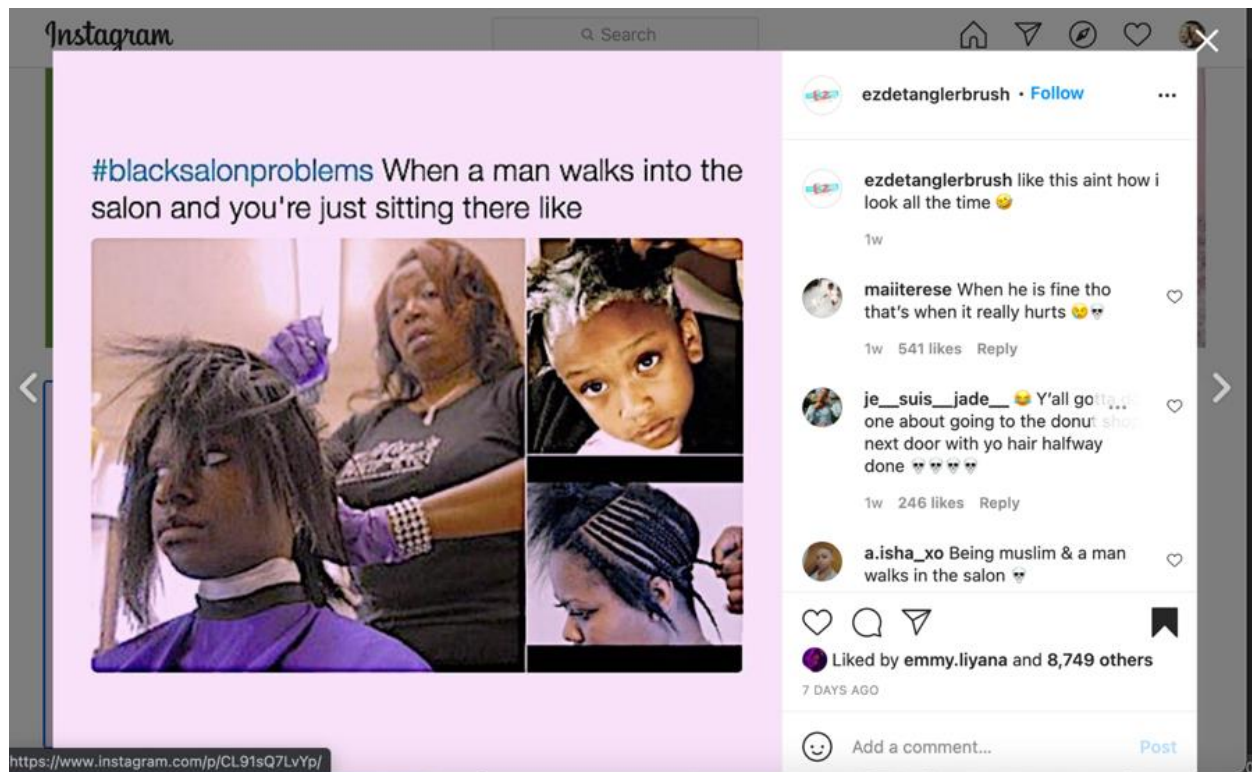


Figure 8. Instagram meme, @ezdetanglebrush, 2021

Braids are not just a style but a craft or an art form, and even the relationship one has with whoever braids one's hair has a special sense of intimacy. Wearing braids protects Black peoples' natural hair from the elements such as heat, humidity and the cold—changes that can drastically affect the health of ones' hair. When I think of my deepest memories of hair and the perception of hair, I remember my mother telling me I had the most luscious, thick, coily, soft hair that was both a pain and a joy to deal with. Like most Black girls, I chemically straightened my hair at some point in my life, a practice that I eventually turned away from. Late into my teens I decided to go natural, a trend I welcomed,¹¹ or, looking back, perhaps it was an intentional process of decolonization. The way white people view Black hair is highly problematic, as they do not possess the language to talk about it, referring to it as 'coarse' or

¹¹ The natural hair 'trend'- where Black women relinquish their chemical hair straightening products and let their hair naturally grow from their heads.

‘hard’ as if they cannot fathom why all that hair would not grow straight and down. Hair culture is an intricate part of Black female culture, and ‘wearing your hair natural’ is a reflection of Black pride. This being said, decolonization still has a long way to go, and there still are socially accepted rules that frown upon and discriminate against Black hair styles, such as dreadlocks, Afros, and braids. Even in Barbados, a country of mainly Black people, there are still ‘rules’ that determine what hair textures and styles are deemed ‘acceptable’.

#realhotgirlshit



Figure 9. Camille Turner *Red White and Beautiful Tour* 2002-present. photograph

In contemporary art, there is a long history of Black women artists creating complex and nuanced critiques of the instrumentalization of the Black body in popular culture. Caribbean Canadian artist, Camille Turner's practice explores race, identity and belonging through performance, video and social practice. In her iconic artwork *Miss Canadiana*, Turner portrays a beauty queen in a series of live site-specific performances entitled the *Red White and Beautiful Tour*. Exploring the Black female body as a site of social investigation, Turner inserts herself into public spaces and records the sometimes surprising public responses. Why should there be any surprised responses though? Turners cultural identity has been defined through the guise of

“multiculturalism” which she asserts is just a “fetishized display of ‘diversity’ rather than an integral part of the fabric of Canadian culture.”¹² In response, she transformed herself into Miss Canadiana, an icon that challenges assumptions about identity and normative beauty. Turner’s investigation and interventions into racism in Canada were one of the first I had discovered by a Black female artist. I thought about the nuances that presented themselves as the public responded to her artwork, and what it meant for her to present herself this way in predominantly white cities. More recent history of stereotypes such as the mammy figure¹³, the jezebel¹⁴, the welfare queen¹⁵ and most recently, the baby mama¹⁶ distort the ways that Black women see themselves and each other. Such images need to be confronted to both recognize that such hierarchies are still in place, and to challenge and subvert them. Her artwork, Miss Canadiana, has powerfully influenced how I saw myself and my artwork, specifically *Taking Down* and *Mummy Please do My Hair*.

¹² Camille Turner, <http://camilleturner.com/sample-page/> accessed 07.04.2021

¹³ A caricature of a dark skinned care giver, typically in the Southern United States who works for a Black family as a cook and a nanny.

¹⁴ The portrayal of a Black woman as a seductive and alluring temptress that is often sexually abused by a white plantation owner.

¹⁵ A derogatory term used in the United States to refer to Black women who deliberately get on and stay on social assistance.

¹⁶ An unmarried Black woman who has a child and is not with the father, often thought of as lower class.

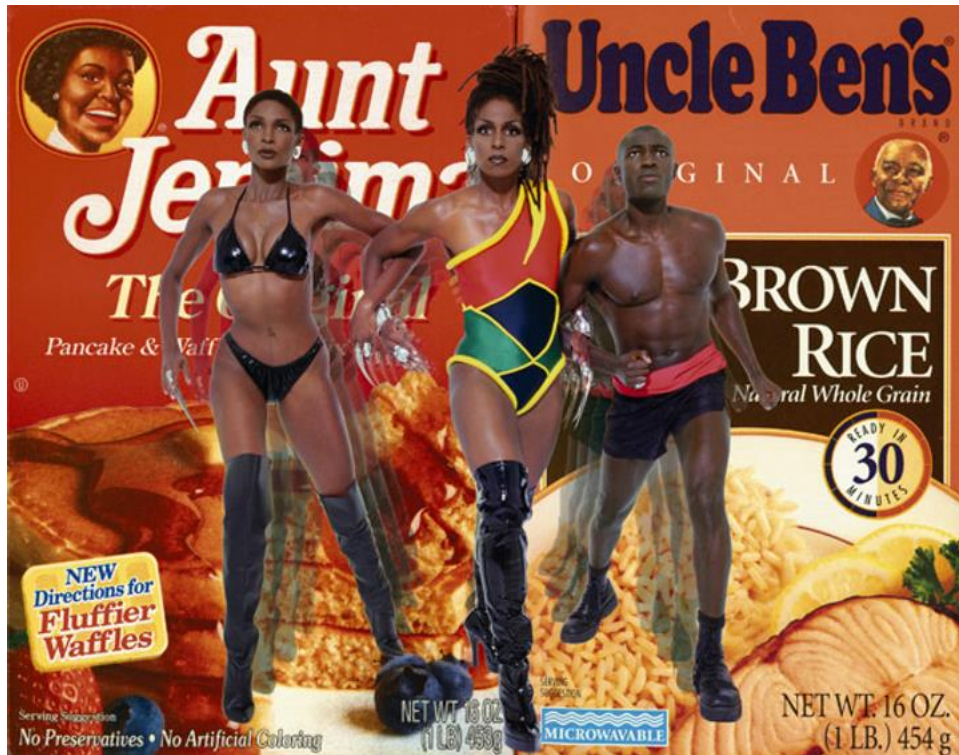


Figure 10. Renee Cox, *Liberation of Aunt Jemima & Uncle B* (1998) CibaChrome Print

Like the aforementioned artists Carrie Mae Weems and Camille Turner, Renee Cox uses her body to celebrate Black womanhood and critique the racist and sexist views that permeate American society. Where I use materials like hair, cotton, rice etc., Cox uses advertisements and media tropes to critique implicit racist views of the Black body. Cox uses alternative forms of historical re-enactment to subvert the dominant gaze—from posing as the Hottentot Venus, to her deconstruction of representation in *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben*, to posing as *Queen Nanny of the Maroons*. When asked about the Hottentot image Cox said “the spectacle isn’t about her it’s about the people who made her into one.”¹⁷ Whereas European doctors and audiences in the 1900s sought to imply differences in the anatomy and race of the Black female body as compared to the white body, Cox brings the history into the 21st century wearing

¹⁷ “After Hot-En-Tot: A Conversation with Artist Renee Cox” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzcNulmKf6o> accessed. 07.04.21

prosthetic breasts and a bottom, attached to her body with visible strings that hang down. “She constructs fictions of the Black female body... by illustrating false and “caricatured” depictions of Black female sexuality prevalent in the dominant culture’s imagination.”¹⁸ Unlike the Venus photographs in which Cox signals the historical continuity of racist representations and fetishization of the Black female body, in the *Queen Nanny of the Maroons*, the artist is giving an homage to an important part of Jamaican history. Finally, *The Liberation of Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima* serves as a reminder of the legacy slavery has left behind in the United States. The male figure represents slave labour on the plantation and both images represent the idea of Black people ‘happy’ to work for their white captors. Such images need to be confronted to both recognize these hierarchies that are in place and to also subvert them. “Cox’s photography... exists uncomfortably under the colonial gaze...which can still render the images as ‘hypersexual’ and ‘deviant’ but we might also contend that her artwork nonetheless creates a counter-aesthetic.”¹⁹

My performances are recorded specifically for the camera, they typically feature myself as a single Black female subject, are direct in nature and in intent. The work is focused on subverting the dominant gaze, as it deliberately breaks down stereotypes, situating the body as a site of resistance against further colonization. I look to the ways in which Black women artists before me have dealt with the notion of compulsory visibility, and how they sought to subvert dominant (white) ideologies. Weems, Turner, and Cox continuously do this throughout their artwork, laying the foundation for how I too can go about addressing the same issues.

¹⁸ Hobson “*Venus in the Dark*” 71

¹⁹ Ibid. 72

There's a Brown girl in the ring

My process often starts with an action or experiment. I am compelled to perform gestures and then spend a long time investigating and contextualizing what it is that possessed me to do them. After a performance, I find myself uncovering deep-rooted memories of home that become stronger the more an artwork is repeated. I consider performative action as a form of exploratory, open-ended research that is constantly evolving. While live performance retains its capacity for radicalness, I continually think about the ways in which live performance and performance-for-camera impact the way the artwork is experienced. Video is an essential part of my practice and performance for the camera leaves space for experimentation without limiting the artwork to a predetermined understanding.²⁰ Live performance is less restrictive and allows opportunities for engaging with an audience. The artwork is ephemeral and not about archiving but a fleeting experience that only those present have the privilege of witnessing, there are sometimes snapshots of what occurred but they do not hold the essence of the performance. The performance for the camera artwork is methodological, there is a clear course of action that I know I will undertake and I am not at the mercy of external factors or influences—I have complete control of the narrative.

²⁰ Valerie C. Oliver “*Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*” (Contemporary Art Museum of Houston, 2013) 25



Figure 11. Racquel Rowe, *Cotton Untitled*, 2020, video still

Cotton Untitled (2020) (Figure 11) depicts me lying on the back, on top of a green backdrop, wearing black underwear, as my head becomes completely covered by cotton balls. This work explores various (and violent) narratives surrounding Black bodies and cotton, by re-contextualizing the history of enslaved labour, capitalism, and materiality. During the performance, I am buried under a pile of cotton balls, remaining underneath it until I can no longer bear it. In *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* Valeria Oliver states that, “the Black body, whether on the auction block, the American plantation... or staged as a “criminal body” by contemporary law enforcement and judicial systems, is a body that has been forced into the public spotlight and given a compulsory visibility.”²¹ The Black body brings with it reminders of deep-rooted historical narratives which I am continuously interested in subverting and exploring in my artwork.²²

²¹ Oliver “*Radical Presence*”15

²² Ibid. 10



Figure 12 Racquel Rowe, *Washing Rice I*, 2019, video still



Figure 13. Racquel Rowe, *Washing Rice II*, 2019, video still

Rice was brought to the Caribbean as early as the 1520s and quickly became a sustaining life source for the region. Today, rice remains a low budget staple for many families and serves as the foundation for many dishes. Washing rice is important because it not only removes the starch, but also dirt and other impurities or things that may be looming in the rice, which is especially important when working with lower grades of rice. *Washing Rice II* (2019), originated from watching my grandmother enact this ritual in my childhood. She would hum folk songs as she sorted through the dry rice picking out the impurities and then would wash small handfuls at a time, during this arduous task time would seemingly fly by and take no time at all even though the laborious act was much harder and more intensive than it appeared.

In Figure 12, I lay naked on my stomach on a lavender backdrop, with my head buried under a pile of white rice. As I performed *Washing Rice I* (2019), I lay on the cold floor on top of the backdrop in anticipating what was to come. As the rice begins to pour over my head, my body gets excited, soon my face is buried and everything becomes dark. I begin to breathe heavily, slightly panicking. I work on calming my mind, drifting off into other thoughts. As verified through the adult only rating I was forced to use when posting the work on Youtube, being buried under a pile of rice is not what offends people, it is my naked Black body instead. Even all the way in Canada I cannot seem to shake the respectability politics that exist in the Caribbean. They exist because during the post emancipation period in the Caribbean Black middle class and religious women struggled to find a national identity that would be respected by whites. These values often put them in opposition to working class women. Middle class Black women earned respect through hiding their asses with appropriate clothing, straightening their hair and bleaching their skin. Any woman who did not want to conform to this was seen as

deviant.²³ The ruminants of sentiments like these reigns true still. Part of the problem in redefining historical perceptions of Black women requires first for Black women to resist the “policing” of each other’s bodies and sexualities.²⁴

In Figure 13, I sit on the same lavender backdrop, but now on top of a blue tarp, dressed in a blue knee length skirt, terracotta tank top, and rainbow headscarf. My legs are spread wide in a triangle. In front of me are two bowls, one filled with water, the other containing rice that I have already washed. When I was filming *Washing Rice II* (2020), an immense sense of nostalgia came over me, for place, for home, for people, and the smell and the feel of the rice in my hands brought memories of seeing hands like mine, methodical and unwavering, performing our history in one simple yet arduous gesture. The labour of the body is undeniable, an act of care and love for those set to consume the food. I think of the washing as a disappearing art form, a generational gap perhaps, as modern conveniences such as rice cookers make things easier. My family however, still uses the stove, never a rice cooker, because who would make rice and peas in a rice cooker? Two cups of water, one cup of rice, that is what I was taught and it never fails me. Last year I got my first rice cooker and it completely turned my world upside down. I still don’t understand the measurement system and how much water is meant to go in, and it also takes just as long as stove top rice. As I load up my rice cooker and leave my pot empty on the stove, I wonder too if this is another loss of tradition happening before my eyes. People of colour have often told me seeing these artworks makes them feel nostalgic, and how washing rice is indeed a thing of the past. Are we inadvertently losing our cultural identity through modernization? I know washing rice is not practiced by my mother, but my

²³ Hobson “*Venus in the Dark*” 107

²⁴ Ibid.107

grandmothers still habitually use this method. Perhaps through these artworks, these traditions can be remembered.



Figure 14. Racquel Rowe, *Washing Rice I (the remake)*, 2021, video still



Figure 15. Racquel Rowe, *Washing Rice II (the remake)*, 2021, video still

Figure 14 depicts me on the same lavender backdrop as in Figure 12, laying in an almost the exact position, naked, face down, with a pile of rice on top of my head. Over the course of a year, my hair has grown, I have noticeably gained weight, and this time the rice does not entirely cover my head. In Figure 15, I sit again, on the same lavender backdrop as in Figure 13, this time though dressed in black, with two clear bowls instead. When I re-enact a performance for the camera, I set out to make the exact same thing happen the way it did the first time. This never actually happens, the re-enactment is always different in some way from the original. This is a process of remembering the gesture, but also where I personally was situated at the time of the first performance.

Re-enacting a performance allows me to discover new complexities within the artwork. When I perform an action more than once, it becomes a ritual my body subconsciously remembers and is held in my psyche. The colourful backdrops on which

the performance for the camera artwork is created echo the bright and vibrant images of home, bringing elements of the Caribbean to the artwork I create in Canada. I continuously use my body to challenge preconceived notions that attempt to define Black women in Western society, through an understanding of the history of colonization, sex, race, gender and food. I often find myself relating the artwork back to specific historical moments that have shaped and defined generations of Black women.

Closer to home

This exhibition is unapologetically Black, Caribbean, and me, and it encompasses everything that excites me. There are moments within the show that only reveal themselves to those from the Caribbean diaspora, these nuances are important because they center people and stories that are purposefully excluded from these artistic spaces. In the face of white supremacy that seeks to undermine and devalue Black people, no power is absolute.²⁵ Through the power of ingenuity and practicing freedom in one's daily life, there will "always [be a] liberatory act that begins with the will to imagine."²⁶ Navigating the racist world of academia and white institutions, it is incredibly difficult to find one's footing and continue the necessary work to have voices of marginalized people centered. As a Black artist engaging in critical conversations around race, my work has furthered my own ability to understand and break away from colonial representations. Decolonization does not come easy, even when artworks are created to challenge colonial and racist narratives, academia lacks the critical language necessary to talk about the complexities of the artwork.²⁷ I personally have found myself underwhelmed, many a time, by white audiences' lack of ability to navigate my artwork, or their unwillingness to engage critically with what is being presented to them. In the words of Audre Lorde:

I affirm my own worth by committing myself to my own survival, in my own self and in the self of other Black women...as I learn my worth and genuine possibility, I refuse to settle for anything less than a rigorous pursuit of the possible in myself, at the same time making a distinction between what is possible and what the outside world drives me to do in order to prove I am human. It means being able to recognize my successes, and to be tender with myself, even when I fail."²⁸

_____Mic drop.

²⁵ hooks, "Art on My Mind" 97

²⁶ Ibid. 97

²⁷ 96

²⁸ Lorde, "Sister Outsider" 354

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Glossary

- Amerindian** refers to the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean. The first Amerindian people were said to have come from Asia through the Bering Straits more than 12,000 years BC.
- Bajan** a common term used to refer to people from Barbados. A small island nation in the Lesser Antilles. Biasedly known as the gem of the Caribbean Sea.
- Decolonization** the process of deconstructing colonial ideologies of the superiority and privilege of Western thought and approaches, power to the people.
- Hypersexual** a misogynistic and racist term used to refer to mostly women of colour exercising their sexual freedoms.
- Maroons** refers to African enslaved people from the colony that was Jamaica who escaped and established free communities in the mountainous interior of the island.
- Matriarchs** a woman who rules or dominates a family, group, or state also referring to: a Mother who is head and ruler of the household.
- Meme** refers to a cultural item in the form of an image, video, phrase, etc., that is spread via the internet and often altered in a creative or humorous way.
- Othered** refers to being part of a marginalized community.
- Racialized** referring to a visible minority and what that encompasses.
- Real hot girl shit** a term made popular by Megan Thee Stallion, the term refers to young Black women taking charge of their lives unapologetically.